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ABSTRACT

A study examined how college students watch television: Are there gender differences in how students watch? Is watching a form of socialization or a means of escape and diversion? Is there a relationship between students' GPA and the number of hours they spend watching television? Subjects were 379 full-time undergraduates--half of whom were male and half female--at a large midwestern university. Survey results showed that 75% of the respondents have a television in their rooms and 70% have a video cassette recorder (VCR). On a typical day, 76% watch less than 2 hours; 35% watch less than one hour; 20% watch 3-4 hours; 4% watch more than 4 hours. About 75% watch less television than they did in high school; 35% describe themselves as highly selective. Men watch more television than women. Women tend to talk or do other things while they watch television more than men do. Also, men were found to be less loyal viewers--44% keep the remote in their hands while viewing. Most watch television with others; about 89% of the men and 92% of the women said they watch television with others. Not surprisingly, data showed a negative correlation between the number of hours spent studying and the number of hours spent watching television; GPA and the number of hours studying were positively correlated. Findings suggest that television behavior is not a singular behavior; TV is watched in many different ways. It appears, however, that television is, on the whole, a social activity for college students. (Contains three tables of data and nine references.) (TB)

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# Television: the Community Hearth for the College Campus

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ED 404 698

In his study of the college experience of undergraduates, Astin (1993) analyzes reams of data to explore some important educational questions and issues regarding the impact of college life. One variable that he explored in his study of interest here was college student's use of television. Astin found that the amount of time college students spent watching television was "negatively associated with almost all academic outcomes: college GPA, graduate with honors, and self-reported growth in all areas of academic and personal development" (p. 389). Further analysis revealed that watching television encourages the development of materialistic values. He notes that television viewing is positively correlated with another variable, Status Striving, which he defines as a commitment to striving for the goal of being very well off financially, "and the view that the principal value of a college education is to increase one's earning power" (p. 390). He notes that these results parallel the findings from other studies done on the effects of television viewing habits for the precollegiate level (Huston, 1992). He speculates the reason for these results based on the concept of involvement: "watching television is a passive activity that can isolate students from each other and take time away form activities that might be more conducive to learning and personal development. At the same time, the content of television programming tends to be heavily materialistic, which may help to account for the tendency of television viewing to encourage the development of materialistic values among college undergraduates" (p. 390).

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While these results are both revealing and interesting, exploring other variables may help to explain why and how college students watch television. Although one of the authors of this paper has taught at the college level for over twenty years, it was only within the past several years that the following questions were seriously explored: How do college students watch television? Why do they watch the way they do? This is the focus of this study.

There is a large body of literature devoted to uses and gratification research (Blumler, 1979; Palmgreen, Wenner, Rosengren, 1985; Rubin, 1979, 1983). This approach to understanding the interaction between media consumer and media is based on the assumption that the audience members are active media consumers and they seek the media to satisfy a particular need . Rubin (1979) found six reasons why children and adolescents use television: for learning, for passing time, for companionship, to forget or escape, for arousal, and for relaxation. Television viewing for passing time and for arousal and relaxation emerged as the most important uses of TV for Rubin's subjects.

In a later study of television audiences, Rubin discovered two types of TV viewers: "The first type consists of a time-consuming (habitual) information seeker who watches television for *ritualized* use. This person is a "more frequent, generalized user of TV who has high regard for television" (Rubin, 1984, p. 68). This person uses TV primarily as a diversion. The second type of viewer is what Rubin labels an *instrumental* television viewer, wherein "viewing appears to be purposeful, selective, and goal-directed" (p. 75). They do not watch frequently nor do they hold television in high regard.

James Lull (1980, 1982) has studied the relationship between media use and interpersonal communication activity in the home and believes that his rules approach can be used to study the rules which apply to how we watch television. He discusses the rules that abound in families regarding how television is to be watched as a family,

communal event. Such rules, undoubtedly, also exist in the residence halls and Greek houses on the college campus.

Lull (1982) defines three classes of rule behavior which apply to a family's television viewing: habitual rules, parametric rules, and tactical rules. Habitual rules are those which are non--negotiable, and focus on negative consequences if rules are violated. Parametric rules are more negotiable. These rules refer to "choice that are allowed (times for viewing, types of programs, particular programs) or to the kinds of contributions that can be made in the program-selection task" (p. 8).

The most interesting of the rules for this study are the "tactical rules" which are used to achieve a personal or interpersonal objective. That is, an individual may watch television, or give in to a roommates desire to watch a particular program not because he or she really want to watch the program, but because he/she want to maintain roommate relational harmony, and so one gives in on certain media viewing patterns.

**The College Student.** The traditional-aged college students who lives away from home is experiencing a very unique world in many regards, most **notably when exploring the student's responsibilities, freedoms, living arrangements, and relationships.** For the first time in their life, going to school does not mean being captivated on a campus with classes every hour from eight till three. Now their classes are scattered throughout the day, some mornings, some afternoons, often with a different schedule every day of the week. This new and less structured schedule means that they have more free time throughout the day wherein they can study, ready, write papers, or play video games, surf the Internet or watch television. They can sleep in late, skip classes, disregard their class responsibilities, and are basically on their own. A parental figure is not always there to make sure they get up and out of the house on time for school. For those who live in a student residence, their evenings could be an ongoing chat session or slumber party, complete with delivered pizzas and loud background music. For those in a residence hall, the student now has to share the

intimacy of his or her bedroom with another, often a total stranger. They also have to compress the "comforts" of home into this small, 112x12 room which many students turn into an virtual household, complete with bedroom, study, kitchen, and powder room.

In other words, being a college student today and moving onto a residential campus can be a life altering challenge. Today's student must grow up quickly, assume responsibilities for his or her behaviors, learn how to meet challenges, and adjust to new living arrangements, including the peculiarities of a roommate who may have different perspective on life, and different interests in television programs.

This study focuses on three specific research questions:

1. Are there any gender differences in how college students use television?
2. How is television used? Is it used as a form of socialization? as a means of escape or diversion?
3. Is there a relationship between students' GPAs, and the number of hours they spend watching television?

**Sample**

Our study is primarily based on data collected on the campus of a large, midwestern university in the fall semester of 1995. This data set includes the results of a survey of 379 undergraduate students who were taking a course in media in society. The subjects were almost equally divided between male (N= 167, 44%) and females (n=212, 56%); they were between 17 and 21 years old (93%), primarily Caucasian (347), and sophomores (193) and Juniors (103). Only those who classified themselves as fulltime students (those taking between 12-16 credits) were included in the study (thereby eliminating 10 part-time students). Just a little over half had a job (198, 52%), but of those one third (38%) worked less than 12 hours a week; the other third (37%) worked between 13-20 hours a week. The students reflect diverse majors, including humanities

or fine arts (11%), social or behavior sciences (19%), physical or mathematical sciences (15%), business (25%), or communications or journalism (31%).

**Results**

**Some general findings of television use:**

A large percentage of the respondents (75%) have a television set in their room, and 70% have a VCR. The majority (61%) rely on television as their primary source of information for national events . On a typical day, the majority (76%) watch less than two hours. In fact, 35% watch less than one hour. A small percentage (20%) watch 3-4 hours a day, and only 4% watch more than 4 hours a day. Almost three-fourths (71%) indicate that they watch less TV now than they did in high school. In fact, the majority of respondents would describe themselves as either highly selective (35%) or somewhat selective (60%) television viewers.

**1. Gender Differences in why they watch TV.** We looked at how students watch television, why they watch, and what they watch. In each of these three areas, gender differences were discovered.

Men were found to watch more television overall than women ($p < .000$, Val: 32.05411, df 4) . The greatest percentage of men (40%, n=67) reported watching one to two hours a day, the greatest percentage of women (41%, n=86) reported that they typically watch that same amount. The difference however comes with further analysis of the data. Nearly the same amount (39.5%, n = 84) of the women also report that they watch less than one-hour of television per day, and only fifteen percent (n=33) indicate that they watch 3-4 hours per day. There is, however, nearly an equal representation of men who watch less than one hour (28%, n =47) and nearly the same amount (27%, n = 5) who watch 3-4 hours per day.

Table 1

Amount of time spent watching television on a typical day for total sample, men, and women

| | Total Sample n=379 | | Men | | Women | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Description | *n* | % | *n* | % | *n* | % |
| **Less than 1 Hr** | 131 | 35% | 47 | 28% | 84 | 39.5% |
| **1-2 Hrs.** | 153 | 41% | 67 | 40% | 86 | 41% |
| **3-4 Hrs** | 78 | 20% | 45 | 27% | 33 | 15% |
| **4-6 Hrs.** | 14 | 3.7% | 7 | 4.5% | 7 | 4% |
| **6 Hrs or more** | 3 | .7% | 1 | .5% | 2 | .5% |

There were also significant differences in the way that college men and women watch television. Table 2 provides a list of statements the subjects responded to. Only those for which there was significant difference between the male and female responses are included. (Appendix A includes a list of the statements for which there was no statistically significant difference between the male and female responses). The subjects were asked to indicate if the statement was "very descriptive", "somewhat descriptive" or "not descriptive at all" of their own behaviors. The percentage of men and women who agreed that the statement was "very descriptive" of them are included here.

An analysis of the different responses of men and women to this list of statements indicates some gender differences between the way that the majority of men and women use television. Over half (54%) of the women indicate that they occasionally do other things which watching television; while only over one-third (35%) of the men agreed that the same statement was also very descriptive of them. Also more women (43%) than men (33%) tend to talk during the programs when they watch television.

Table 2: Percentage of men and women who indicated the statements included were very descriptive of them.

| | Men | Women |
|---|---|---|

| Statements | % | n | % | n | p |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| "I occasionally do other things while watching TV such as homework, reading, or talking on the phone | 35% | 59 | 54% | 114 | .0016 |
| "When I watch TV with other people, we tend to talk during the program. | 33% | 56 | 43% | 92 | .0172 |
| "When I do watch TV I usually watch programs that are on one of the major commercial networks, CBS, ABC, or NBC. | 18% | 30 | 47% | 100 | .0000 |
| "I enjoy watching daytime soaps. | 14% | 24 | 39% | 83 | .0000 |
| "I change channels a lot." | 42% | 69 | 20% | 42 | .00002 |
| "I keep the remote control in my hand when watching TV. " | 44% | 73 | 25% | 53 | .0005 |
| "I usually prefer to watch programs on some of the other cable channels." | 43% | 71 | 19% | 40 | .0000 |
| "I change channels a lot." | 42% | 69 | 20% | 42 | .00002 |
| "I keep the remote control in my hand when watching TV. " | 44% | 73 | 25% | 53 | .0005 |
| "I turn the TV on as soon as I get home." | 25% | 40 | 16% | 33 | .00283 |
| "I like to watch sporting events on television." | 66% | 110 | 17% | 36 | .0000 |
| "I have the TV on most of the time when I'm in my room." | 27% | 45 | 16% | 33 | .0029 |

Just over two-fifths (42%) of the men indicate that they change channels a lot (compared to 20% of the women), and a comparable percentage (44%) keep the remote control in their hands. It seems apparent that male viewers are not loyal viewers; that is, they may stay tuned to a program only until they become bored or until the commercial break, then they flip to another channel. Also, approximately two-fifths of

the men (43%) prefer to watch programs found not on one of the major commercial networks. The women seem much less apt (19%) to venture onto the cable channels. Many of the male viewers spend a significant amount of their television viewing watching the specialized cable channels, notably ESPN, Discovery, CNN, and FOX. More women (47%), on the other hand, prefer to watch programs on the commercial networks than do the men (18%).

More women (39%) than men (14%) enjoy watching daytime soaps; and conversely more men (56%) than women (17%) like to watch sporting events on television. More men (25%) than women (16%) turn the television on as soon as they get home; and more men (27%) than women (16%) have the TV on most of them time when they are in their room. Many of those who do turn the television on as soon as they get home, or have it on when they are in their rooms may do so as a source of companionship, to provide background noise. Because the television is on, however, does not mean that they are paying attention to it. For many students, when they turn the television set on, it is comparable to those who turn the radio on when they get home. It fills up the room. Many of them also turn the television on so they can access information, whether that be scores for sporting events (ESPN), news (CNN or CNN Headline), weather (The Weather Channel) or for simply noise (such as MTV). They may or may not become engaged with the content of the program.

**2. Is television used as a form of socialization or is it used primarily as a means of escape and diversion?**

Our analysis reveals that students use television for different purposes depending on their particular needs at the time; that is, many of them use it to fill the time, to relieve stress, to facilitate procrastination, or as background noise in an empty room. Some of them do watch television to be entertained, and many watch television as a form of socialization. For many, television watching is a fun activity to do with their friends; it is a time to socialize. Some would see this as a time for "roommate

bonding". In discussing this issue with students, many said that their television viewing is a group activity. Given the living arrangements found in residence halls, or social fraternities/sororities, this seems perfectly normal. Half of the subjects in the study agreed that they got together with friends to watch a particular program in a "ritualistic manner." At the time of the study, this was notably either the NBC Thursday night "Must-see-TV"(48%) or it included watching sporting events on the weekends (38%) . Other examples may include several guys from the same floor who get together every afternoon at 4:00 to watch two syndicated programs, The Simpsons followed by Jeopardy, or a roomful of students who get together to watch a daytime soap opera on a routine basis. Of those who agreed that they watch some programs ritualistically, the majority (61%) were women (compared to men, 39%).

Over half (60%) of the subjects have a roommate. In this study the largest portion (38.5%) share a room in a sorority or fraternity; 21% share a room in a residence hall. Nearly one-third (32%) live alone in an apartment. (Knowing living arrangements in this community this most likely means that they have a private bedroom but share the apartment with others.) Only a small percentage (6%) live alone in a residence hall or live at home with their families (2%). Of those who have a private room in a residence hall, they are still living within and must conform to the rules of communal living that permeate residence halls.

Most of the subjects (53%), usually watch television with others; however a large portion (43%) of the remaining subjects indicated that they sometimes watch with others. And only four percent indicated that they rarely watch with others.

When asked their preferences, the greatest major of both the men (89%) and the women (92%) indicated that the statement "I prefer to watch TV with other people" was either very descriptive" or "somewhat descriptive " of them. In talking with students about their television viewing habits, many of them indicate that watching television is a "good time to socialize with friends." One student who lives in an

apartment with three roommates noted that her roommates watch a daytime soap opera, and she watches also primarily to use the time as a "chance for roommate bonding."

For these students, television seems to serve an important social function; television provides a reason for getting together with friends (or roommates) and watching some television. This is oftentimes "purposeful" or "appointment" television viewing. That is, this is not usually casual get togethers, but those involved make it a point to gather at a certain place at a certain time to watch a particular program. This is a different type of television viewing than having the television set on in the room while studying or preparing to leave for classes. Rubin (1984) would most likely refer to this type of viewer as one who attends to television for "instrumental use." I consider this purposeful viewing, where the purpose may have more to do with having something to do with other people than the specific content of the program.

**3. Is there a relationship between students' GPAs, and the number of hours they spend watching television?**

Our data concurs with Astin's study (1993) reported earlier. We discovered a negative correlation between the amount of hours the students spend studying, how much they watch television and their grade point average. A student's GPA and the hours they spent study were positively correlated ($r = .1752$; $p<.001$). GPAs were negatively correlated with the amount of time spent watching television ($r = -.1747$, $p>.001$). In other words, those who watch the most television, indicated that they had a lower GPA than those who watched less television; also those who study more have higher GPAs.

The largest percentage of subjects (37%) indicate that they spent between 11 and 20 hours during the past seven days studying. Sixteen percent studied more than 20 hours, and the remainder studied for only ten hours or less.

**Conclusion**

Television viewing behaviors of college students are not easy to categorize or stereotype. Indeed, as Rubin (1984) discovered, we cannot "assume that all television audiences are active in the same way or for the same reasons (p. 76). Television viewing is not a singular behavior. The data analyzed here, along with countless hours talking with college students about their television viewing behaviors indicates that the viewing patterns of college students are as unique and individualized as are the students themselves. While there are some heavy viewers, the majority (76%) watch less than two hours a day, and of that figure 35% watch less than an hour a day. College students are busy, with multiple demands on their time. They simply don't have time to watch a lot of TV. When they do watch, however, they oftentimes watch as a form of relief from the pressures of the day; many watch late in the evening hours, long after their instructors have gone to bed for the night.

Most students have some favorite programs -- whether it's sporting events, soap operas, sitcoms, talk shows, news programs, reruns or movies. Many watch these programs with others, typically their roommates, or friends from down the hall. Television is a social event for many students; in fact, we could call television the "community hearth" of the college campus. That is, television serves an integral part of communal living arrangements. It is a social activity for many college students. It provides for some communal bonding. For some, television serves as a window of the world bringing the reality of the days events to them, through news programs, talk shows, or even sporting evenings. For others (or even for the same individuals, at different times), television provides for an escape from the obligations of the day either as a brief respite, or as a major form of procrastination from academic responsibilities. While a few prefer to watch television alone, or in silence, the majority see television watching as a communal event, one which provides time for bonding, for socializing, for

feeling like they are a part of a community, even if it is just two or three who are watching a mutually agreed upon television program. While there is a need for more studies of the college-aged television audience, this study does begin to ask some appropriate questions and tries to put television viewing by college students into a new, more functional perspective.

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Appendix

Table 3:
Percentage of men and women who indicated the statements included were very descriptive of them. No significant differences between the two groups

| Statements | Men % | Women % | p |
|---|---|---|---|
| I enjoy watching news programs | 32% | 22% | .109 |
| I prefer to watch TV alone | 12% | 9% | .616 |
| I prefer to watch with other people. | 42% | 44% | .632 |
| My friends sometimes get mad at me because I talk too much during some programs they want to watch. | 13% | 16% | .75877 |
| When I do watch, I usually give my full attention to watching whatever program is on. | 16% | 11% | .0569 |
| I tell myself that watching TV is a waste of my time, but I watch it anyway. | 14% | 20% | .13 |
| I like to watch talk shows | 14% | 23% | 14.26 |
| I would describe myself as a highly selective viewer. | 38% | 33.5% | .62659 |
| | | | |